

# Doubting the Malagasy Remedy. Rumours and Suspicion During COVID-19 in Madagascar

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After the world came into the grip of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, Madagascar suddenly moved into the spotlight of global media attention. Backed up by low incident rates and no deaths, the president of Madagascar announced in April that local scientists had found a cure for COVID-19. During a TV broadcast, he sipped from a bottle dubbed Covid-Organics (CVO) and heralded the herbal concoction as a remedy for the global crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO), however, reacted with scepticism and cautioned against the drink because no evidence of its effectiveness had been proven. The announcement of CVO and the response of the WHO sparked new hearsay in Madagascar and on social media alike. Some focused on the marginalisation and exploitation of Africa by global health organisations. Others assumed hidden intentions of the Malagasy government. Many buzzes questioned the ingredients of the herbal drink or that CVO was just another political stage act with a hidden agenda.

This article takes rumours about conspiracies and other hidden schemes about CVO as a starting point to scrutinize how Malagasy debunk a state-inflicted infodemic. I argue that these narratives are not about an epistemic void that needs to be filled but, instead, about knowing too much about an ongoing drama to take a single, even hopeful, political act at face value. More specifically, I engage with suspicion as the driving force to decipher political acts as manipulative populism. Rumours and conspiracy theories are part of everyday discourses in Madagascar, and the challenges of navigating fact and fiction became a habitual practice that highlights the normalisation of socio-economic crises over the last five decades.

*Keywords:* conspiracy theory, doubt, infodemic, pandemic, medicine, poison, bioprospecting, neoliberalism

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

COVID-19 brought the world to a halt in the early spring of 2020. During the ensuing pandemic, Madagascar has been cut off from most global flows and regional interconnectedness. Three major cities were forced into a full lockdown, including the capital. The economically boosting flow of tourists stopped and all national parks were closed. In the wake of the pandemic, the World Bank has already predicted an increase in extreme poverty for Madagascar, undoing the slight decline over the last three years.<sup>2</sup> Amidst the upcoming crises, unexpected news of hope spread quickly through social media and attracted unprecedented global media attention.

The Malagasy President Andry Rajoelina announced on Twitter on 12 April 2020 that he was confident that Madagascar would “change the course of history” in the “global war against the COVID-pandemic”.<sup>3</sup> He was waiting for clinical tests. Some days later, on April 16, the Malagasy state-owned television broadcasted an 18-minute documentary. Two airline pilots narrated how they flew “Joana”, a Brazilian visitor, across the island in November 2019, describing a route that took the shape of a cross.<sup>4</sup> “Joana” claimed that she had been sent by God and came to Madagascar to deliver a warning. Accordingly, the world would be soon overwhelmed by biological warfare, but Madagascar alone would have the remedy. The trailer of the documentary was posted on the official Facebook page of the Malagasy president.

Rajoelina stood in front of TV cameras on 20 April and presented Covid-Organics (CVO), a herbal concoction that should prevent and cure COVID-19. He downed a dose and declared that he “will be the first to drink this today, in front of you, to show you that this product cures and does not kill”.<sup>5</sup> The tonic has been developed by the *Institut Malgache de Recherches Appliquées* (IMRA, “Malagasy Institute of Applied Research”)<sup>6</sup> and was based mostly on sweet wormwood (*artemisia annua*). In the broadcast, Rajoelina urged his citizens to use CVO as a preventive measure and announced that it would be given for free. He continued that the drink would also be beneficial as a curative treatment. Accordingly, the president explained that

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1 This article is part of a wider project on envy and migration projects of young, educated Malagasy in the city of Mahajanga. I have spent sixteen months in the Indian Ocean port city and conducted research between 2011 and 2014. I am grateful to all my Malagasy friends and interlocutors for explaining to me the various ways of coping with the challenges of navigating facts and fiction. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers whose careful reading and critical suggestions helped to improve the manuscript significantly.

2 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/09/03/madagascar-world-bank-provides-75-million-to-mitigate-the-impacts-of-covid-19-and-support-recovery> (accessed 19. 11. 2020).

3 [https://twitter.com/SE\\_Rajoelina/status/1249246905311297537?s=20](https://twitter.com/SE_Rajoelina/status/1249246905311297537?s=20) (accessed 15. 09. 2022).

4 “Joana” was in Madagascar between 24 October and 10 November 2019 and supposedly delivered the prophecy on 8 November 2019.

5 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52374250>; <https://time.com/5840148/coronavirus-cure-covid-organic-madagascar/> (accessed 16. 11. 2020).

6 The institute was founded by private means but is recognised as a public utility working closely with the state regarding health promotion and the protection of biodiversity.

“tests have been carried out – two people have now been cured by this treatment” and that the tea “gives results in seven days”.<sup>7</sup>

The case of CVO is not new or unique but part of widespread tendency of state-inflicted thinking that caused a rapidly spreading infodemic, thus, an overabundance of accurate and inaccurate information (Islam et al., 2020). Crazes of hydroxychloroquine endorsed by the then United States President Trump or vodka cures in Belarus were omnipresent and widely discussed in global news during the pandemic (Freckelton, 2020). The government in Tanzania did not accept possible vaccines but recommended its citizens to inhale steam from local plants to kill the virus (Richey et al., 2021). The Malagasy case differs insofar as CVO has been marketed as a scientifically developed invention and displayed as a modern manufactured and bottled product to a global audience. Its form and orange colour resonated with consumer-friendly soft drinks and simultaneously radiated scientific knowledge and hipness, not the sterility of capsuled medicaments nor the cluttered form of local herbs that needed to be prepared first before consumption.

Covid-Organics was a remarkable break from other state-promoted local treatments and created the hope that an African discovery, produced on a marginalised island struck by poverty and legacies of slavery and colonialism, could finally make history. The concoction was on its way to become a rallying cry for African knowledge and local medicine worldwide. In the wake of the public announcement, African states instantly expressed their interest in importing the herbal tonic and the Malagasy government generously shipped CVO as donations to Nigeria, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, Equatorial Guinea, Tanzania, Senegal and Ghana. In a few weeks, CVO became an iconic response to a worldwide crisis and a silver lining for African solidarity (Richey et al., 2021).

However, the president’s broadcast also sparked global disapproval. The WHO immediately cautioned against the drink and underlined that no evidence of its effectiveness had been proven. *Artemisia* is commonly used as an antimalarial medication, but its uncontrolled application might breed treatment-resistant malaria strains. Actually, the Malagasy government continued to refuse to publicise clinical tests on the herbal drink. In the spring of 2020, however, the president seemed to hold all the cards as infection rates were relatively low. The state, thus, argued that the low cases of infections – only 149 cases in May 2020, no deaths<sup>8</sup> – were the result of an early government-led lockdown and the distribution of CVO among the population.

The announcement of the Malagasy president and the instant response of the WHO immediately caused rumours to swirl on Internet forums and in newspapers

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7 <https://time.com/5840148/coronavirus-cure-covid-organic-madagascar/> (accessed 16. 11. 2020).

8 The low numbers could be the result of an interplay between low detection rates, a regulated transport system and effective regulations (Evans et al., 2020); <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/madagascar> (accessed 17. 11. 2020). Another important point is that the majority of the Malagasy population are under 25 years old and, therefore, might not have detected an infection due to mild bodily reactions.

that were quickly commented on Facebook and YouTube, or in Tweets. Accordingly, French scientists admitted that Africa is used as laboratory to test new drugs and CVO might just be one of those disguised medications. Other rumours targeted the WHO for trying to bribe the Malagasy president to poison CVO to prove its worthlessness. Some Malagasy citizens questioned the exact contents of the beverage and articulated suspicions of poisoning. Here, a single political act around a possible remedy for a worldwide problem stimulated Malagasy citizens to interweave distinctive narratives about political propaganda, neocolonial exploitation of Madagascar, Pan-African solidarity, a global religious network and local cosmologies about poisoning.

This article takes rumours around CVO as a starting point to scrutinize the ways in which Malagasy declutter and debunk a political act and rising infodemic as a manipulative policy of a government that attempts to exploit the ignorance and gullibility of its citizens. As such, it investigates the social suspicion among Malagasy as a state of doubt that things may not be what they seem. In alignment with other researchers (Boyer, 2006; Mühlfried, 2021), I argue that rumours and conspiracy theories are not about an epistemic void that needs to be filled but about knowing too much about an ongoing drama to take a single, even hopeful political act in times of crises at face value. We can never be sure whether we truly understand what others do or say, but the lack of insight also causes the desire to make sense of a given situation and achieve clarity to manoeuvre.

Engaging with rumours is an intellectual endeavour as people opt to search for multiple sources for reading single events and attempting to explain them (Briggs, 2004). Rumours are not about facts or fiction, implausible half-truths, bizarre quackery or misinformation but resonate with the view that power operates secretly and needs to be approached with suspicion (West, Sanders, 2003). According to Ann Laura Stoler, rumour is a “key form of cultural knowledge that [...] shaped what people thought they knew, blurring the boundaries between events witnessed and those envisioned, between performed brutality and the potentiality for it” (1992: 154). Rumours could be read as allegorical narratives and a social commentary addressing anxieties associated with past experiences and future uncertainty. Indeed, rumours send the message to be careful and avoid possible calamities. They overlap with the temporal direction of suspicion as they are anticipatory in their aversion to being surprised. The future-oriented caution generates a complex relationship of temporality that goes back- and forward. Possibilities or even expectations of bad surprises require that misfortunes are always already known. The temporal progress and regress of attitudes are interwoven in an infinite circle of concealment, discovery, revelation and rediscovery. This constant flow of secrecy and disclosure is important as rumours change constantly even if they contain similar cores of meanings, experience or knowledge.

Suspicion is a crucial attitude that propels people’s curiosity into unveiling secret plots. Over the last decade, anthropologists have abandoned a perspective that favours unambiguous social situations of trust as a foundation for sociality and

morality and engaged with affective attitudes such as mistrust and doubt (Carey, 2017; Gade, Willerslev, Meinert, 2015; Geschiere, 2013; Mühlfried, *Ed.*, 2018; Mühlfried, 2021; Pelkmans, *Ed.*, 2013, Pelkmans, 2018; Schulz, 2020). Suspicion, doubt and mistrust are part of a semantic field with different but strongly overlapping implications. These are outlined by Pelkmans as “dispositions” that entail “an affective position towards knowledge, carrying evaluative (aesthetic, moral, political) dimensions” and refer to an “epistemic crisis of sorts, one in which appearances, assumptions and assertions are being interrogated” (2018: 169). These dispositions are based on tensions between a subject and that which is suspected, mistrusted or doubted. Pelkmans argues that their productivity lies in their impetus for knowledge acquisition. When suspicion (or doubt) is raised, things are not taken for granted and people search for new insights. Suspicion motivates extensive information exploration to reduce ambiguity (Fein, 1996). The tensions involved in knowing/not knowing prompt knowledge production that offers alternative roots and routes of an official narrative.

The current infodemic is strongly related to flourishing conspiracy theories about COVID-19. A burgeoning body of literature addresses the beliefs, impacts and challenges of conspiracy theories on the pandemic (Douglas, 2021), in particular regarding misinformation as a threat to the public that causes vaccine hesitancy (Islam et al., 2020; Mukhtar, 2021). Several anthropologists have investigated conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 in more nuanced ways (Ali, 2020; Manderson, Levine, 2020; Sturm, Albrecht, 2021). For some authors, conspiracy theories are an effective medium for the articulation of social and political criticism against state authorities (Sobo, Drażkiewicz, 2021). They are regarded as “counter-hegemonic knowledge claims” (Sturm, Albrecht, 2021: 123) and resonate with a strong political expression of discontent as they exist in contrast to official theories about cause and effect. Unlike rumours, which are not necessarily political, their origins could be often traced back to certain individuals or groups and their political intentions (Fassin, 2021).

However, questions very often linger: why do people believe in rumours and conspiracy theories, and what could be done about it? Or how should academics deal with misinformation, post-truth or conspiracy theories (Grodzicka, Harambam, 2021)? Much research has focused not only on the ways in which powerful actors attempt to debunk rumours and conspiracy theories but also how they fail in such attempts, disregarding the existing knowledge within local communities where rumours or conspiracy theories flourish.

This article reverses the perspective and shifts to the social suspicion of educated Malagasy at home or abroad and how they debunk a state-imposed narrative. When a lot of the investigations concerning conspiracy theories and the pandemic are situated in the Global North and embedded in medical anthropology, the Malagasy case around CVO is rooted in the prominent field of research on witchcraft discourses (Bubandt, 2014; Comaroff, Comaroff, 1999; Geschiere, 1995; White, 2000). Within this analytical frame, anxieties, rumours and casual outbursts of violence work as local explanations for rapid political and economic transformations that gave birth

to a new economy, a fusion between cultural concepts and global capitalism. Modernity and a new market economy brought rising inequalities as well as unimaginable and sudden riches for a minority through economic mechanisms that manifest as shadowy techniques. This situation elicits a paradox: on the one hand, new magical means are increasingly sought after to gain riches, on the other hand, accusations of using them could be deadly.

As many authors have already emphasised, rumours of the occult and witchcraft show a close affinity with conspiracy theories as they all muse about hidden schemes and forces of power (Rabo, 2020; West, Sanders, 2003). Yet, conspiracy theorising operates on a different rather global scale (Fassin, 2021). More than rumours about occult formations, conspiracy theories rely on their circulation through social media. Part of the experience of powerlessness and uncertainty is fuelled by the whirlwind of images and overexposure to information provided by the new media age. The digital media and forms of knowledge connected to them cause a new precariousness of information, a generalised uncertainty whereby the distinction between fake and reliable news is left to individuals. Most recently, Geschiere argued that the uncertainty and hidden meanings of news, rumours and conspiracy theories “is nothing new to many Africans, for whom any attempt to separate the visible from the invisible, or the real from the false, has always been highly precarious” (Geschiere, 2021). The fragmentation of reality through social media – and its globally circulating conspiracy theories – are part and parcel of everyday life as a constant preoccupation with the invisible. Witchcraft discourses are, as claimed, all about an overload of information.

Gossip, rumours and conspiracy theories about the invisible are a common genre of public discourse and everyday sociality in Madagascar. Many Malagasy are well aware of the uncertainties regarding the unknown and the pandemic was just another layer upon an often complicated life. Rumours about envy and witchcraft, betrayal and poisoning as well as organ trafficking and the theft of ancestor’s bones are well-researched themes (Desplat, 2018; Freeman, 2004; Gardini, 2019; Somda, 2014). As a specific genre of social conversation, they ponder secret plots and abuses of power. Despite their often contradictory messages, they share the conviction that things are not what they seem to be.

This article is not about how Malagasy rumour and theorise about conspiracies or how their engagement with them become political acts.<sup>9</sup> I did fieldwork on migration projects and envy discourses among young students and how they navigate social proximity and distance on their ways to becoming a responsible adult (Desplat, 2018, 2022b). Most of my interlocutors were from middle-class milieus and, although their political position varied, they were often united in their suspicion and frustration about the various Malagasy governments and the political elites. Most of

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<sup>9</sup> Some Malagasy theorised about conspiracies. One of the widespread rumours among some of my interlocutors has been that COVID-19 is a hoax and an invention of the illuminati. However, this rumour soon died out after increasing numbers of death causalities were related to the virus.

my Malagasy interlocuters, I would assert, were very critical and political in their reflection on the current world. Yet, they did not engage in politics directly, partly because of the absence of a functioning civil society, partly because of their fatalistic frustration that nothing would change except that it would become “worse and worse” (*miharatsy miharatsy foana*).

I first heard about CVO through the rumour mill of Malagasy friends that were able to migrate to Europe<sup>10</sup> and where they sometimes frustratedly, sometimes enthusiastically commented, and recapped the various narratives that they have heard on social media or from their families back home. Over the following months, I further engaged in conversations about the various stories and how my interlocuters deconstructed one narrative after another with the help of Facebook.<sup>11</sup> However, for reasons of smoothing out the incoherent narrative of informal talks and various accounts, postings and chats on Facebook, I back up this article with various news articles to reproduce the information trail of my Malagasy interlocuters in a more structured way: from the trajectories of rumours around CVO to their debunking as profitable good that enriches the elite and the dangers of possible poisoning of ordinary citizens.

### The rise and fall of Covid-Organics. Trajectories of rumours and conspiracy theories

The announcement of CVO as a remedy and the critical response of the WHO sparked rumours and conspiracy theories alike, echoing south-south relationships and pushing back on centuries of tense medical relationships with colonial powers. One buzz focused on the discriminating policy of the WHO as the organisation stifles medical products from Africa and, simultaneously, pushes medical research for a vaccine from the Global North on all levels. The rumour has, furthermore, been fuelled by an interview of the Malagasy president by the French news channel France 24, where he reasoned that “the problem is that (the drink) comes from Africa and they can’t admit [...] that a country like Madagascar [...] has come up with this formula to save the world”.<sup>12</sup> Following the interview, other claims have been unearthed in which the Malagasy president refused to take a bribe of 20 million dollars to poison the herbal drink to prove its futility.<sup>13</sup> How else could it be explained

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10 After fieldwork, I stayed in touch regularly with about ten to twenty young Malagasy through WhatsApp, Facebook and e-mail. I also followed three of these students on their migration paths to Europe and visited them in France, Italy and Germany.

11 When mobile phones became affordable in Madagascar around 2013 and the telephone company Orange provided a tariff called *Akama* with unlimited access to Facebook for a small monthly fee, the social network became the main means to communicate and receive global and local news.

12 <https://www.france24.com/en/20200511-madagascar-virus-potion-scorned-because-it-s-from-africa-president> (accessed 17. 11. 2021).

13 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52819674> (accessed 17. 11. 2021).

that WHO denied the possibility of *artemisia* to cure COVID-19, a plant that is, furthermore, forbidden in France, the former colonial power?<sup>14</sup>

More gossip circulated among Malagasy about the hidden intentions of the Malagasy government. One narrative evolved around the claim that two French scientists announced that they intended to use the African continent as a laboratory for experimenting with new drugs. The French supposedly argued that Africa has nothing to lose and that the continent will gain from these tests in the long run.<sup>15</sup> In a similar line, some Malagasy further claimed that CVO has been promoted as part of an official state research programme, yet, in reality, it is an experimental drug invented by Western doctors. Many citizens did not only target Western health professionals but also the Malagasy state, suspecting that the government would collaborate with global health interventions.

Most of my Malagasy interlocutors doubted that a local plant alone could have such an impact on a global crisis. For them, it was a clear case: either CVO must have been fabricated outside of the island as most are convinced that Madagascar is not able to produce anything of global worth. Thus, the government is lying and most probably pursuing business. Alternatively, the herbal drink is indeed a Malagasy product. However, that makes CVO even more suspicious because many Malagasy would not believe that the government could create something so beneficial and globally relevant out of a local plant alone. Hence, CVO could contain experimental drugs, a belief that is strongly linked to local cosmologies about poisoning.

One of the first reactions in the Malagasy press and political opposition has been the accusation that the government takes its citizens for fools. In the wake of CVO's introduction, a lot of criticism has focused on the documentary of the Brazilian visitor and her prophecy about a Malagasy remedy. When members of the opposition accused the president of taking advantage of the naivety of the public to sell a cure, Rajoelina's chief of staff defended her boss, saying "it is necessary to recognize that there are unexplained mysteries in the world".<sup>16</sup>

Such shallow reasonings by state officials were answered by the public with sheer disbelief. Accusations of populism and political manipulation in the press started to be articulated through the register of cartooning, a widespread form of expression to criticise political events (Jackson, 2013). In one drawing, the "medical patient" Madagascar sits in front of the president sitting in a "producer's" chair. She complains about her symptoms of anxiety and social crises during the pandemic. The Malagasy president prescribed in his answer watching the movie on the prophecies of a Brazilian woman.<sup>17</sup> Other cartoons mock the president himself as he broadcasts

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14 <https://www.france24.com/en/20190111-reporters-plus-malaria-business-big-pharma-vs-natural-medicine-artemisia-annua-who> (accessed 19. 12. 2021).

15 <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/07/what-french-doctors-and-the-who-really-said-about-africa-and-vaccine-testing> (accessed 18. 11. 2021).

16 <https://www.thedrifthmag.com/the-dj-and-the-miracle-cure/> (accessed 19. 12. 2021).

17 <https://www.koolsaina.com/video-bresilienne-aurait-ete-employee-a-madagascar-par-dieu-pour-faire-des-revelations-prophetiques/> (accessed 15. 09. 2022).

CVO as a remedy, claiming that CVO “cures the virus in those who have not contracted it”.<sup>18</sup> In another caricature, three Malagasy citizens gesticulate and shout that ignoring the efficacy of CVO is an affront against Madagascar and knowledge from Africa. While they accuse the WHO and pharmaceutical groups of a conspiracy on the front stage, a Malagasy politician sneaks away in the background with a sack of international aid containing 444 million dollars.<sup>19</sup>

The latter drawing commented on the inflow of external aid during the pandemic. The island received about 337,9 million dollars in emergency support from the International Monetary Fund in July 2020<sup>20</sup> for healthcare and to relieve economic spending. The World Bank has put another 75 million dollars into supporting Madagascar. The money was meant for poverty reduction and procedures for e-money accounts to facilitate cash transfers, protect jobs, support the private sector and improve the electricity infrastructure. Yet, the caricature pictured what most Malagasy believe: only the elite of Madagascar profits from foreign aid, while ordinary Malagasy citizens are lured into the belief that the WHO and other global institutions are to be blamed for their doubt in the “Malagasy remedy”.

Sceptical arguments deepened far into August 2020. Within a month, infection rates quadrupled to 14,000 cases and 173 people died.<sup>21</sup> Critical statements about the spread of the virus caused the dismissal of the Malagasy Minister of Health. The CVO lost its attraction as African nations that once proudly promised to purchase the Malagasy cure now reversed their course. Ghana stated that their purchase was to test CVO but not to distribute it to the public. In a similar vein, Senegal emphasised that it did not prescribe the potion to its citizens. Tanzania also clarified that their shipment was only for clinical testing. Nigeria affirmed that CVO would not be able to cure COVID-19, while a science advisor to the Congo’s National COVID-19 Response Committee announced that an *artemisia* study had found “no effectiveness in either prevention or treatment”.<sup>22</sup>

Many Malagasy in Madagascar continued to perceive CVO as a state business to fill the pockets of a small elite. The mistrust in politicians became more pronounced when the free distribution of the drink stopped and was sold for 1,500 ariary (about 0.33 euro), the equivalent of a soft drink.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, in October 2020, the government facilitated the marketing and transport of CVO by producing the

18 <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1023477/societe/chronique-covid-organics-loptimisme-tradipraticien-face-a-la-flambee-malgache/> (accessed 28. 12. 2021).

19 <https://www.facebook.com/1679722448954868/photos/a.1679742525619527/2631022227158214/> (accessed 28. 12. 2021).

20 <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-madagascar-economy-idUSL5N2F19QX> (accessed 19. 11. 2020).

21 <https://www.stopfake.org/en/madagascar-s-president-promised-a-miracle-coronavirus-cure-it-didn-t-work/> (accessed 19. 12. 2021).

22 <https://www.theafricareport.com/40316/madagascar-spike-in-covid-casts-doubt-on-miracle-remedy/> (accessed 23. 12. 2021).

23 <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/in-madagascar-more-will-starve-than-die-of-the-virus> (accessed 19. 12. 2021).

ingredients as capsules. Manufactured by the new pharmaceutical enterprise Pharmalagasy, the pill CVO+ increased the perception of many Malagasy to observe a state business operation instead of solving a health crisis.<sup>24</sup>

During that time, 16,400 coronavirus cases and at least 232 deaths were reported. And the government still supported the virtues of CVO. A team of investigative journalists was able to track down the mysterious “Joana” in Brazil in the spring of 2021 and subsequently broadcast an interview with her on a private TV station. Accordingly “Joana” confirmed the narrative of the initial documentary about her prophecy. When being confronted with the rising number of deaths on the island, “Joana” emphasised that the “majority of the Malagasy are analphabets” and do not understand plain instructions. They simply should drink more CVO.<sup>25</sup> Not surprisingly, Malagasy have not been amused by the short movie but also scratched their heads at the sturdiness of the Malagasy president who continued to promote CVO as a remedy.

### Secret plots and shadowy state practices in neoliberal Madagascar

The trajectories of rumours and conspiracy theories over the period of a year show how the Malagasy government held robustly on to its claims, while the public did not take these at face value. The perception of the Malagasy state by its citizens is submerged in mistrust and doubt as many people feel that state policies and decision-making are not what they seem to be. Politics appear to be a hidden realm beyond the grasp of ordinary citizens as they appear obscure and controlled by a small group of elite families. During my fieldwork, the majority of my Malagasy interlocutors were frustrated and did not feel that they had an impact on political decisions. The uncertain power behind the opaque appearance of political speeches and practices persuades people to believe that reasons and causes are not disclosed.

The threat of the pandemic to the Malagasy health system and the economy did not introduce new societal anxieties but instead added a new layer of uncertainties. Doubts, suspicions and mistrust have historical roots and a lot of the disquiet experienced is related to an unstable and unpredictable state. The history of Madagascar has continuously witnessed cycles of political crisis and economic growth that itself would lead to another political crisis. Scholars coined the term “Malagasy paradox” (Razafindrakoto, Roubaud, Wachsberger, 2020) when describing the circular dynamics of politics and economics. According to this view, Madagascar has suffered from a severe cycle of continuous economic downturn that has been fed by a particular pattern: whenever the country has witnessed indications of economic

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24 <https://www.barrons.com/news/madagascar-launches-covid-organics-capsules-01601655605> (accessed 18. 12. 2021).

25 [https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/prophetiebresilienne?source=feed\\_text&epa=HASHTAG](https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/prophetiebresilienne?source=feed_text&epa=HASHTAG) (accessed 16. 12. 2021).

growth, political crises inevitably followed and caused further economic problems. Crises basically became a normal and expectable condition. The case of the current President Andry Rajoelina (2009–2014, 2018–) underlines this claim.

His political ascension from DJ and owner of radio and TV stations to the mayor of the capital put him quickly into an oppositional position towards the then President Marc Ravalomanana. The revelation of a conspiracy of the Malagasy government, however, truly boosted his reputation and helped him to the presidential seat. On 19 November 2008, the Financial Times unveiled a secret land leasing deal between the Malagasy government and the South Korean conglomerate Daewoo.<sup>26</sup> According to this report, the multinational company planned a 99-year lease for 1.3 million hectares, the size of Belgium, for the production of maize and palm oil that would be shipped back to South Korea. It has been the largest lease of this type in history and would have supplied half of South Korea's grain imports.<sup>27</sup>

The report played into the hands of Andry Rajoelina, who accused the government of enriching itself at the expense of its citizens. In January 2009, he seized power as the self-proclaimed interim president of Madagascar in a military-backed coup d'état. The hopes associated with the coup, however, did not last long and new forms of economic hardship and deepening inequalities entered the everyday life of many Malagasy citizens. The newly established transitional government, the *Haute Autorité de Transition* (2009–2014)<sup>28</sup>, has been internationally condemned as illegitimate from its start in 2009. Foreign governments sanctioned Madagascar for the undemocratic change of government in various ways, for example, by suspension of its membership in some multilateral bodies, restrictions of aid funds, personal sanctions on some individuals and the removal of trade benefits (Ploch, Cook, 2012).

The period became well-known as *la crise*, 'the crisis', and the coup is one of the examples of how promises in Malagasy politics are built up but crumble after some time, adding another chapter to postcolonial governmental changes that are fuelled with optimism but end up with yet another economic downward spiral. The population under the poverty line was already high before 2009, but the crisis forced 92 % of the Malagasy to live on under \$2 a day, cementing Madagascar's position as one of the poorest countries in the world.<sup>29</sup> In urban contexts, the increase of un- and underemployment and a boom in the informal subsistence sector further intensified already existing inequalities. Due to the sanctioning freeze in international aid by multilateral donors, the country's economic policies have switched to new sources of funding. Rosewood exports, mining exploration with foreign companies and shady practices of land grabbing became rampant (Burnod, Gingembre, Andrianirina, 2013; Duffy, 2007; Ke, Zhi, 2017).

26 <https://www.ft.com/content/6e894c6a-b65c-11dd-89dd-0000779fd18c> (accessed 16. 12. 2021).

27 <https://taz.de/Blutige-Unruhen-in-Madagaskar!/5168064/> (accessed 23. 12. 2021).

28 In Malagasy, *Fitondrana Avon'ny Tetezamita* (FAT).

29 The world atlas put Madagascar in position 10 in 2017; <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-poorest-countries-in-the-world.html> (accessed 15. 12. 2017).

Increasing exploitative forces blurred the former distinction between the ‘local’ and ‘global’ or between ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’ accumulation. The local illicit trade is reliant on global networks of traffickers and traders, and together they form a complex whole that produces massive wealth as well as deep socio-economic inequalities (Duffy, 2007; Ferguson, 2006). Yet, the Malagasy government did not seem to be in control regarding these operations, which resulted in further embezzlement and informal trafficking. As such, the rumours and conspiracy theories about CVO as a remedy for a global crisis underline the perceived exploitation that shifted to the role of *artemisia* for the so-called remedy.

### *Artemisia* and the commercialization of local plants

COVID-19 and the rush to find and test potential treatments in scientific trials revived the debate over the use of humans in Africa in critical drug trials. When two doctors suggested during a TV broadcast in April 2020 that trials of a potential vaccine should take place in Africa, they made the comments against the backdrop of the question whether a tuberculosis vaccine might be effective against COVID-19. One of the doctors compared the situation with “certain AIDS studies, where among prostitutes, we try things because we know that they are highly exposed and don’t protect themselves”.<sup>30</sup>

Although the doctors apologized after coming under pressure from anti-racist organisations, the statements rejuvenated debates about medical experimentation in Africa, informed consent and forced medical procedures. That a local plant or a Western drug is used/tested in Madagascar comes as no surprise. Madagascar is considered a biodiversity hotspot with nearly 90 % of endemic animals and plants. Malagasy use plants for buildings and textiles, and a lot of people utilise medical herbs to treat illnesses. People particularly in rural areas rely on local plants for therapeutic use due to limited funds and remote health facilities. Pharmaceutical medicaments when available are combined with local plants.

Pharmaceutical products have been introduced to cure illnesses since French colonisation (1896–1960). The foundation of the IMRA rejuvenated the interest in local plants for the national health system in 1958. Malagasy ethnobotany started to develop remedies out of medical plants for scientific and marketing purposes (Puri, Masum, Heys, Singer, 2010). COVID-Organics was also developed by the IMRA, however, it was an internationally attuned agenda as well. Its English branding already oriented the potion to a global market and the religious empowerment of the Brazilian prophecy sparked global esoterism.

*Artemisia annua*, the main ingredient of CVO,<sup>31</sup> originated in China, where it has been commonly used as antimalarial treatment. It is similarly utilised in Madagascar

30 <https://globalvoices.org/2020/04/11/covid-19-revives-grim-history-of-medical-experimentation-in-africa/> (accessed 19. 12. 2001).

31 It became public in the ongoing debate about CVO that another important ingredient was *ravintsara*

against malaria or to treat fever. However, a complex web of international interests evolved around *artemisia* shortly before the outbreak of the pandemic. On 23 March 2020, a few weeks before the broadcast of the COVID-19 remedy by the Malagasy president, the French-based non-governmental organisation *La Maison de l'Artémisia* had sent letters to various African governments advocate artemisia and advising the countries to test the plant against COVID-19. This non-governmental organisation has been actively advocating *artemisia* against various illnesses since 2012 and established branches in over 20 African states.

The plant also became part of a growing industry in Madagascar in 2005 when the company Bionexx, founded by a French expatriate, produced *artemisia* for the global market with a network of about 16,000 smallholder Malagasy farmers.<sup>32</sup> Pushed by the slogan 'A Growing Solution for Madagascar, Africa and the World', Bionexx was involved in the production of CVO, although the drink was officially developed by IMRA. However, the close connection between cultural knowledge, politics and global-local manufacturing became highly evident. Yet, Malagasy citizens did not profit directly from the production of the plant or the distribution and selling of CVO.

The monetarisation of local medicine in Madagascar has had a long history. Today, France and other nations use Malagasy plants as commodities in areas ranging from nutrition to therapeutic agents, as well as cosmetic tools and for recreational principles (La Mesa, Ranalison, Randriantseheno, Risuleo, 2021).<sup>33</sup> Approximately one million tons of medical plants are exported per year, at a value of about 3,592 million dollars (quoting a lecture by Slotkin, 2011). The political economy of bioprospecting, i.e. the commercialization of valuable genetic resources for the improvement of medicine, should help to finance biodiversity conservation and generate economic opportunities for social and economic development (Neimark, 2012). In reality, gains are not made and even biopiracy has become a common practice. Over the last year, the most popular case has been that of Eli Lilly, a company that developed drugs from the Malagasy rosy periwinkle, and made about 100 million dollars from the sale without giving any royalties to Madagascar (Reid, 2009).

## **"This product cures and does not kill." Cosmologies of poisoning**

I was often told during my fieldwork that I should be careful when eating and drinking with strangers, as they might use "bad medicine" (*fanafofy ratsy*) to render me unconscious, take my belongings or otherwise harm me. I should particularly

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(in lat. *revensara aromatica*), an antiseptic and antiviral substance that is commonly used in aromatherapy globally.

32 <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20200806-profiting-from-madagascar-s-herbal-cure-for-covid-the-story-behind-artemisia-united-states-france> (accessed 30. 12. 2021).

33 <https://cosmeticobs.com/en/articles/focus-on-french-launches-33/madagascar-the-newpromised-land-of-cosmetics-2122> (accessed 19. 12. 2021).

take care when alcohol is involved – on the seafront promenade, for example, or in city bars – as ‘friends’ might gang up on me, or a waitress might use “love magic” (*aody fitia*) to lure me into a relationship against my will and turn me into a zombie to work her family’s land in the countryside. The concept of the waitress as a poisoner is a standard male perspective, with echoes of drunken impotence, sexual attraction, fantasies of cheating, magical means and socio-economic inequality, as most young women working in bars or at the seaside come from a poorer social strata. Here, poison becomes a weapon of the weak or disenfranchised, who take advantage of those feeling safe and at ease while consuming relatively high-priced alcohol during their leisure time. When young Malagasy weave poisoning into their perception of ‘friends’ they depart from the undifferentiated and even anonymous attacker and situate their narratives within a context of commensality, i.e. the sharing of food or drinks. Thus, someone who is envious of another ultimately employs their intimate commensal proximity to covertly poison the intake of the victim (Desplat, 2022a).

When the Malagasy president announced that CVO cures and does not kill, he anticipated the suspicion of Malagasy citizens against food and drinks that are prepared by Malagasy people they do not know. Many Malagasy commonly express a potential disbelief when others announce the efficiency of not only amulets or magic but also local medicine. However, the doubt also extends to the possibility that such powers might work (Graeber, 2001). This contradictory view resonates with strong anxieties regarding poison and the social construction of illness and medicine (*fanafody*), because *fanafody tsara* (“good medicine”) substances possess healing powers or might be protective. However, *fanafody ratsy* (“bad medicine”) substances, such as local plants, can shade into the occult and witchcraft, inflicting pain, sickness and death, or forcing others to obey orders. Poisonous substances, often a combination of powders from different types of plants, are associated with *fanafody ratsy*.

Poison is related to malicious magical practices and/or witchcraft, thus, bringing harm to an adversary and advantaging the perpetrator (Graeber, 2007; Sharp, 2002). On a broader level, *fanafody* is used as a powerful means of controlling or manipulating events in everyday life. The powerless are believed to use it to increase their power, status or success in relation to others, or to obtain change or relief in relation to everyday hardship (Sharp, 1990). “Love magic” (*aody fitia*), for example, is a medium through which people ponder the nature of power; debate its rights and wrongs; start endless arguments about hidden powers and motives, such as envy, desire or resentment; and question when it is legitimate for humans to influence others. To talk about magic and poison is to talk about the fears and dangerous powers detected by Malagasy in their social environment.

David Graeber (1996) argues that these fears echo new perceptions of witchcraft and love magic that evolved during the French occupation. Elders and ancestors exercise power in Madagascar through what Graeber terms “negative authority” (1996): that is, they coerce and restrict other people, but do not make them act or give them direct orders. During French colonial rule, however, hierarchies operated

through direct orders, a practice perceived by the Malagasy as alien and foreign. The introduction of a new level of hierarchies, between colonialists and colonised, also changed relationships between the Malagasy. Graeber takes love magic as an example of their deep mistrust of “any sort of relationship in which one person gains complete control over the actions of others” (Graeber, 1996: 433).

When people in Madagascar are suspicious of the unpublished ingredients of CVO they not only contemplate about their powerlessness in the face of the state but also revive past experiences of its arbitrary measures. Today, the fear of poisoning is sometimes linked to historical narratives regarding the *tangena*, an ordeal by poison. Named after a nut-bearing plant, the *tangena* has been viewed by the Malagasy as embodying a sacred power to unmask covert activities of witchcraft and betrayal. Thus, poison serves as a means of eliminating witchcraft rather than as a malicious form of magic. Initially, the poison was given to animals that represented the accused. If the animal died, the accused has been proved guilty and would be punished by other means. Later on, the poison has been given directly to the accused.

Poison was not the weapon of the weak but the powerful tool of political leaders. The *tangena* was appropriated and centralized by pre-colonial governments as official policy, both to exercise justice and eliminate political and economic rivals. Approximately 250,000 people lost their lives as a result of the poison ordeal between 1790 and 1862, most of them during the reign of Queen Ranavalona I (1828–1861). According to Campbell (1991), slaves were the major target as the most vulnerable social segment to accusations of witchcraft. Ellis (2002), however, denies this claim and argues that more free men became victims of the ordeal, thus, emphasising the constant power struggle between oppositional forces and more or less equals. Today, people in Mahajanga remember the *tangena* as a means to discredit others, possible enemies using witchcraft accusations, thus, supporting Ellis’ argument that the ordeal was a means to eliminate possible enemies. The Malagasy state announcing CVO as a remedy has its historical undertones that constitute today’s mistrust of powerful institutions. What are the factual ingredients of CVO, a concoction that has not been clinically tested? Is it only a local plant? Do the contents of a bottle heal or harm? These questions asked by Malagasy interlocuters highlight again that their perception about the efficacy of CVO is not about outright rejection, but is rooted in general doubt and suspicion.

## Conclusion

During 2020, my Malagasy interlocuters responded to conversations about CVO and the role of Madagascar in the world with a broad variety of affective states from astonishment and a little pride to frustration and utmost shame about the public performances of their political leaders. Lingering behind these reactions lies the conviction that hopeful political acts cannot hold their promises. Promoted as a Malagasy remedy, the drink could have changed the world and, for a short while,

many Malagasy believed in a better future. For sure, it put Madagascar at the centre of global attention during a time of a severe worldwide pandemic crisis. But the announcement also stirred a series of conspiracy narratives that targeted the WHO, French scientists and, even more so, the Malagasy state and its representatives as untrustworthy agents with hidden agendas. Alternative explanations of the events around CVO by newspaper reports confirmed the suspicion of most Malagasy that invisible powers and actors are at work.

Mistrusting the state is a common disposition in Madagascar based on past experiences and expectations for the future. Against this backdrop, the experiences of bad political governance and disinformation shape Malagasy expectations towards political communication as essentially contradictory. Positive rhetoric of hope cloaks an undercurrent of the anticipated immoral accumulation of wealth. This is, indeed, a very pessimistic view as no state representative is considered trustworthy, a view that is very shaped by historical experiences.

Today, doubt, suspicion and mistrust are hard to change because economic and political developments often confirm a negative disposition towards the state and global institutions. Rumours and conspiracy theories are social comments about these past experiences and projections of an uncertain future. The events and reports that unfolded after the announcement of CVO proved the hesitation towards political agents. It may well be argued here that Malagasy are passionate, even obsessed, with rumours about not only conspiracies but also betrayal, poisoning and envy. These narratives all communicate that one should be careful and prepared for possible misfortunes. However, they also help the idea or suggest that ordinary people could regain control of their lives. They mirror the intellectual endeavour of a society that could help to discover real conspiracies.

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